What About Us?: African American Workers and the Struggle for Economic Justice in the Age of Diversity

(Extremely Rough Draft)

Educational institutions in this society have necessary and inherent political and social obligations. As educators you represent financial power, community influence, and social prestige. If your function of equipping students to cope successfully with reality is to be fulfilled, then you must not only be responsible, in terms of your educational functions, but you must also be responsive to the communities you supposedly serve. Armstead Robinson, 1969.¹

On the night of May 4, 1970 at approximately 10:30 p.m., fifteen hundred students at the University of Virginia converged on the historic Rotunda to register their outrage at the brutal murder of four coeds at Kent State University in Ohio. Earlier that day, campus activists at Kent State had embarked on their fourth round of demonstrations against President Richard Nixon’s deployment of U.S. troops to Cambodia. Their protest turned deadly when the Ohio National Guard fired into the large crowd of demonstrators, wounding ten students and killing four others. Anger gripped the nation as more than 400 colleges and universities witnessed massive demonstrations and protests over the Kent State murders. If administrators at the University of Virginia expected only an episodic outburst of dissent from their students, they were in for a major disappointment. Over the next ten days, the university many regarded as a bastion of political and cultural conservatism transformed into a hotbed of radical protest against the ongoing war in Southeast Asia. Students refused to attend classes, occupied buildings, and pushed the University’s president, Edgar Shannon into a heated confrontation with state legislators in Richmond. Combined with challenging the war in Southeast Asia, student activists addressed larger issues facing the University, including its role in the militarization of U.S. society, its integration of African Americans and women into the student body and key


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administrative positions, and its commitment to improving the economic conditions and protecting the labor rights of low-wage workers on grounds.

At the center of much of the campus upheaval at UVA was James Roebuck, a graduate student from Philadelphia who several weeks before the Kent State massacre had been elected as the first African-American president of UVA’s Student Council. A gifted leader, Roebuck had the task of mediating the brewing conflict between his peers, the University’s president, and a seemingly trigger-happy state all too ready to rely on force to quell dissent. On the fourth day of student protests, Roebuck faced his greatest challenge when local police and the National Guard harassed and arrested dozens of students, invaded several fraternity houses on Rugby Road, and all but turned the University’s storied “academical village” into a war zone. To restore order, as well as regain the confidence of his students, President Shannon fiercely condemned the state for its excessive use of force. The former Navy Seal also reiterated his frustration with “the continued alienation of our young men and women owing largely to our nation’s military involvement in Southeast Asia.” Ever the diplomat, Shannon arranged meetings between student activists and key Virginia lawmakers to discuss the critical issues facing the nation: “It is my firm conviction,” Shannon explained in a letter to Senators William Spong and Harry Byrd, “that student views and questions on this matter need to be heard by those in a position to influence and shape national policy. Likewise, I feel it is important that our students have an opportunity to learn more about this complex matter directly from those in positions of national leadership.”

A “militant insider” whose calm temperament proved quite useful as the University appeared on the verge of imploding from within, James Roebuck served as the primary, student representative for the University in upcoming talks between campus activists and various state

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officials, most notably Governor Linwood Holton and Senators Byrd and Spong. Coupled with his talks in Richmond, Roebuck also sought to convince UVA administrators to accept the students’ broad set of demands. On the second day of their protest, Roebuck and other leaders composed a list of demands that ranged from ending ROTC to removing all law-enforcement officials from the grounds to the University publicly committing “itself to accepting 20% as a goal for the enrollment of black students throughout the University.” The last demand addressed the labor issue: “We demand that President Shannon express public support for the right of University employees to strike and bargain collectively.”3 In the minds of many, the University was a deeply conservative institution; however, the results of the students’ vote on the collective bargaining issue belied such a portrayal. To the shock of many, 6,936 (79%) students supported the right of workers to strike and bargain collectively.4 Though students’ level of support varied in terms of their willingness to take personal risks, the positive numbers clearly indicate a pro-workers position among a critical mass of students.

Far from an isolated phenomenon, UVa students’ advocacy on behalf of non-academic employees was part of a national trend in which black and white activists connected their struggle to transform the institutional structures of higher education with ongoing battles to assist the nation’s low-wage workers in their quest for economic justice. On the campuses of North Carolina A&T and UNC-Greensboro, for example, black students viewed the implementation of a politically vibrant Black Studies curriculum, the massive unionization of black workers, and the democratization of higher education as central to the implementation of their larger Black Power agenda. Similarly, on the campus of San Francisco State University, Black Studies

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3 May Days: Crisis in Confrontation, 1970

4 Ibid.

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activist James Garrett sought to build a “Black Student Union,” which would include “students, faculty, security people, buildings and grounds landscapers, gardeners, [and] maids who worked the dorms.”

Much has changed in the world of higher education since the 1970s but the plight of African American low-wage workers remains an issue of great concern for many campus activists. On the grounds of the University of Virginia, for example, the movement to secure a living wage for laboring women and men at the bottom of the pay scale has been active for more than twenty years, drawing support from a diverse cadre of students, faculty, union activists in the city, and workers. Its leaders have written moving manifestos championing the implementation of a living wage as a public good, organized labor teach-ins and forums, arranged meetings with campus administrators, and sought to build coalitions (most notably, the Labor Action Group) across occupational lines. To its credit, the Black Student Alliance at UVA also included a call for a living wage for African American workers in its list of demands to President Sullivan in the aftermath of ABC officials’ arrest of third-year student, Martese Johnson during the tumultuous spring semester of 2015.

Though the living wage movement has elicited the greatest amount of media attention, low pay has not been the only labor-related issue confronting African American workers at the University of Virginia. Along with their calls for better pay, black working women and men have drawn attention to other labor concerns, most notably, occupational advancement, racially discriminatory disciplinary practices, and the absence of employee input in critical decisions related to hours and workers’ safety. Their struggle for workplace justice rather than simply job

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access and mobility forms an important though largely unexplored chapter in the history of African Americans at UVA.

This paper uses the University of Virginia as a case study for examining the challenges confronting black workers, particularly those at institutions with not just a stated commitment to racial diversity, inclusion, and equity but identifiable markers of progress in those areas over the past 50 years. In many ways, UVA qualifies as such an institution. The decade following the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 witnessed the University increase its African American undergraduate population, establish an African American Studies program, and form the Office of African American Affairs, an institution specifically designed to serve the social, intellectual, and cultural needs of black students. Moreover, in the early 2000s, UVA followed the lead of other schools in creating an Office of Diversity to address matters related to admission policies, the hiring and retention of African American faculty, and the “racial climate” on campus. More recently, President Sullivan established a Commission for the Study of Slavery at the University as part of her effort to deal with the school’s racial legacy.

These initiatives and “achievements” are frequently referenced in conversations about the University’s commitment to racial diversity and equity, but how might those conversations differ if we put low-wage workers at the center of our analysis? To what extent, if any, have black workers’ wages, laboring conditions, and opportunities for occupational advancement improved since the Civil Rights movement? With these and other questions in mind, this exploratory paper examines the economic struggles and political battles of African American low-wage earners at UVA from 1969 to 2006. It also engages the complex ways in which a diverse coalition of student activists, civil rights organizations, and workers themselves have sought to draw

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attention to the University of Virginia’s status as the largest employer in Charlottesville (and Albemarle County) and its moral obligations to not just its lowest paid employees but Central Virginia. Organized chronologically, my analysis is divided into four sections. The first section covers the period between 1969 and 1980, looking at how the Civil Rights movement transformed black workers’ employment opportunities. The second section provides a snapshot of African Americans’ representation in the University’s workforce between 1980 and 1992 and their episodic efforts to gain greater control over their working conditions. The third section examines the highly controversial, *Muddy Floor Report*, which investigated African American workers’ complaints of racial discrimination between 1993 and 1996. It also engages how this report, coupled with political developments at the state and local level, led to the revitalization of calls to unionize workers, particularly vulnerable minorities. The last section looks at the efforts of students and faculty to implement a living wage at UVA between 1996 and 2006.

**SECTION I**

On a chilly November morning in 1969, thirty students from the University of Virginia eagerly journeyed to the nearby town of Wanyesboro to assist striking workers in their fierce battle with General Electric (GE) over wages and employee benefits. Counted among the student leaders distributing leaflets at the General Electric Components Plant was one of the University’s most outspoken leftists, Thomas N. Gardner. A native of New Orleans, Gardner entered the University of Virginia in 1964. Unwavering in his commitment to political organizing, the dedicated activist withdrew from the University for a couple of years to work with the Student Association’s Southern Project and then the Southern Student Organizing Committee (SSOC). Moved by the SSOC’s broad political agenda, he served as its president.

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6 *Cavalier Daily*, November 11, 1969.

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from 1967 to 1969. Upon his return to the University, Gardner plunged hard into campus politics while remaining attentive to developments taking place in central Virginia.

Like several of his undergraduate peers, Gardner viewed the expansion of student activism into the labor arena as one of the most important developments of the late sixties. Across the South, in both rural and urban areas, black and white collegians participated in political protests that belied the myopic portrayal of student activists as divorced from the real struggles of working people. On the pages of UVA’s student newspaper, the *Cavalier Daily*, Gardner sought to alert readers to existing partnerships between workers and students:

Students have been increasingly working with people in their own communities, black and white, to help them mobilize against injustice suffered for too long. Students in Georgia worked in support of the wild-cat striking women in Blue Ridge, Ga; students in Appalachia have worked with anti-strip mining committees, the Appalachian Volunteers, the Southern Conference Education Fund, and the Black Lung striking miners; over three hundred (300) N.C. college students worked with striking textile workers against Cone and Burlington Mills in North Carolina; students were active in the sanitation and hospital workers’ strikes in Memphis, Atlanta, and Charleston; and students all over the South have worked on behalf of the UFWOC’s boycott against all California table grapes with the full knowledge that the inclusion of farm workers could have important positive effects on the rural aspects of the Southern economy.7

As many scholars and activists have noted, the personal and institutional ties that bound organized labor, the black freedom struggle, and the student wing of the New Left had a history that went much deeper than the 1960s.8 Still, many student activists of that decade, including Tom Gardner, sensed that the time was ripe for a more politically robust partnership between students and labor. In explaining one of the sources of his own optimism about the revolutionary possibilities of the moment, Gardner noted the growing-class consciousness among students at UVA. “For the past four years or more, students have been especially concerned with the plight of the University’s own employees. Living constantly in view of this situation has perhaps made

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7 *Cavalier Daily*, November 7, 1969.

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us more aware and sympathetic to the problems of employment elsewhere. The University, with 4,400 non-academic employees is the main employee in Charlottesville, and with its starting salary of $3,168, is, thus one of the main perpetrators of poverty in Charlottesville.”

As historian Nancy Maclean points out, the idea of employment as a “key site in determining personal well-being and communal power” echoed in the statements of many 1960s activists. In 1963, for example, the Charlottesville NAACP insisted that “the job a person has is basic to his position in society…it determines the nature and condition of his property; the health and education of his children, the moral environment of his family, and his individual self-respect.” Such arguments intensified as civil rights advocates increasingly drew a connection between other local problems—particularly housing—and the disproportionate number of African Americans in low-paying positions. Though noting that Charlottesville had “come a long way in its race relations,” Reverend Henry Mitchell, president of the Community Action Organization, identified “underemployment” among African Americans as a major problem in the local community. “There are certain jobs that Negroes aren’t allowed into. Some are consistently denied entry into certain fields, and have no chance of success there…The way this ties in with the housing problems is this—Negroes can’t make enough to get by. The unemployment rate of Negroes in Charlottesville is under the state level, I’d suspect; but the underemployment rate—meaning pay below normal standards is very high here. People don’t

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make enough to support themselves, and simply can’t afford to move and raise their standards.”

Small surprise given these realities, the condition of University employees, particularly low-wage black workers, was a central theme in most student protests of the late 1960s and early 1970s. On repeated occasions, student leaders accused the University of failing to “adequately deal with Charlottesville’s social and economic problems.” Such negligence, they maintained, was unacceptable given the school’s centrality to the local economy. As James Roebuck and Bud Ogle noted in 1968, “The University, as the city’s largest employer, source of income and influence, has a special responsibility to the larger community.”

The seriousness in which students regarded the labor question as central to their overall agenda of transforming UVA was especially apparent on February 18, 1969, when four hundred students converged on the lawn to mark the end of their three-day protest over the University’s “Racist Atmosphere.” Over the course of the spirited rally, student leaders put forth numerous demands, including but not limited to the following: the integration of African Americans into all areas of campus life, the elimination of application fees for low-income students, a public statement from the Athletic Director confirming his commitment to recruit African American athletes, the formation of a Black Studies department by the fall of 1970, and the hiring of an African American as Associate Dean of Admissions. Students also directed their attention to the needs of low-wage earners. To the delight of the audience, they demanded that the “legislature of Virginia raise the minimum wage scale for all non-academic University employees in the state and allow the University of Virginia the option of raising its own pay scale.” Not just concerned

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1 Cavalier Daily. October 21, 1968.
2 Cavalier Daily, November 14, 1968.

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with pay, the protesters also called for their elected officials to “pass legislation to the effect that University employees have the right to organize employee associations, collective bargaining agreements, strike, and affiliate with national unions." 13 Of course, this would end Virginia’s status as a Right to Work state.

The students’ demands were noble but largely ineffective in changing the University’s approach to the status and condition of low-wage workers. Placing their emphasis on equal opportunity and access, President Shannon and his staff crafted a plan of action designed to ensure that the University complied with the requirements of Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Under the leadership of Paul Saunier, the University’s Equal Employment Opportunity Programs (EEOP) handled the school’s compliance work. Created in 1965, the EEOP tackled the issue of minority hiring and promotion. As a result of the EEOP’s efforts, which should not be minimized, the University increased the presence of African Americans in the workforce, as well as opened previously closed positions to black workers. The number of African Americans employed at the University increased from 1,004 in the spring of 1968 to 1,126 in the spring of 1969.14 Equally important, the representation of black workers in skilled, clerical, and professional positions also increased substantially during this period. Not everyone believed, however, that the University had rid itself of its discriminatory policies. On January 14, 1969, Robert Banks, a UVA student, cited two cases of racial discrimination. One case involved two African American men who sought employment with the Buildings and Grounds department but were told by an unidentified white employee that there were no vacancies. The next day, according to Banks, “two white men were hired when there had been no reduction in personnel from the day before.” The second discriminatory incident involved an African American male

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who had been hired for a “janitorial position at $1.35 an hour while a white man was hired for the same type job on the same day at $1.40 per hour.”\textsuperscript{15} Countering Banks’ charges of racial bias and discrimination, S. Arnold Nunnery, assistant director of personnel, attributed the differences in pay to the fact that the white and black janitors were hired by different men.

Hardly satisfied with the University’s response, student leaders continued to monitor its employment practices. They also continued to point out the low pay scale for non-academic employees, particularly those in service and maintenance positions, as a major problem. Their battles with University administrators over pay revealed the competing notions of workplace justice operating in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

While sympathetic to the students’ concerns, Saunier defended the University’s pay scale as consistent with market value. So, too, did the University’s Director of Personnel, Paul Jenkins. “Our basic competition for the unskilled service is from hotels, motels, and restaurants and these businesses are not covered by the $1.60 per hour federal minimum wage. This means that in the community the general rate for the unskilled service worker is between $1.40 and $1.60. The rates paid by the University for unskilled institutional type labor is generally what is paid for this kind of help in the community.” Perhaps anticipating pushback on his market-based response, Jenkins informed the students to direct their anger to Richmond. Insisting that the University’s hands were tied, Jenkins placed the blame for the low pay scale on state legislators: “The main problem is to overcome the burden of the general state philosophy of

\textsuperscript{15} Cavalier Daily, February 13, 1969.

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salary administration, which is to perpetuate mediocrity. The general policy has been a very conservative application.”16

In defending the University, Jenkins also sought to redirect the students’ attention away from compensation and into the area of job training. “Custodial work is not a career,” he noted. “We should not think of salary raises as the only end for those employees. If an employee has a capability for a higher position, his skills should be improved.”17 To help their workers ameliorate their condition, UVA offered adult night classes, as well as training courses for clerical work. So far as Jenkins was concerned, the statistics confirmed the University’s commitment to low-income workers, particularly minorities. From March 1970 to March 1971, the number of African American workers rose from 1,103 to 1,263, a 14% increase. Of the 160 newly employed black workers, 106 were in clerical positions.

Feeling confident about UVA’s progress, President Shannon celebrated the institution as a welcoming space for black workers. If any employee felt as they had been the victim of discrimination, he maintained, the office of the EEOP would work immediately and effectively to rectify the situation. “Those University employees who believe that they may have been discriminated against are assured that they can have prompt consultations with University officers responsible for the elimination of discrimination.”18

Shannon and his predecessor Frank Hereford, along with other UVA officials, repeatedly reiterated the University’s commitment to racial equality in the workplace, but one key development in 1974 gave the larger public cause for concern. That year, the *Cavalier Daily*

16 Ibid.
17 Ibid.

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published a series of explosive articles on the large number of UVA administrators, including President Hereford, who belonged to the all-white Farmington Country Club, which at the time still barred African Americans. “Our worst suspicions, our most grievous concerns have been confirmed,” the paper bemoaned as it revealed the list of UVA officials who were members of the club: 17 department chairs; 7 deans; 3 directors or executive directors of University Alumni activities, programs, or agencies, 3 members of the Athletic Department; 1 Vice-President, and 1 President. The “Farmington crisis,” as it was referred to in local newspapers, confirmed for many the resiliency of white racism at the University of Virginia, a resiliency that had larger implications for black workers. Counted among those belonging to Farmington were administrators who shaped hiring patterns, evaluated job performances, and determined pay scales.

That the University had administrators who belonged to an elitist, all-white institution didn’t surprise those who encountered disrespect on a daily basis. Such was the case for many service and maintenance workers who dealt with inadequate wages, subpar working conditions, and their managers’ handling of sick leave and benefits. Their issues with the University was brought to light in 1977, when the Cavalier Daily published an article entitled, “Clean Enough to Clean the Dirt.” One housekeeper in her fifties complained of being “treated like a dog.” Her and other

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19 *Cavalier Daily*, February 8, 1974.
20 President Shannon, who resigned as president in 1974, ended his affiliation with the Club in the late 1960s.
21 Largely due to student protests surrounding the Farmington Crisis, the University created the Office of African American Affairs in 1976, a central institution on grounds that has played a vital role in the success of black students. The years following the formation of OAAA witnessed several important demographic shifts as the number of African Americans undergraduates continued its upward trend. Moreover, by the end of the 1970s, African American students had created a vibrant institutional culture, anchored by the Black Student Alliance, Black Greek Letter Organizations, and the Black Voices Gospel Choir. Taking advantage of the opportunities created by those who came before them, African American students continued to thrive during the 1980s as not only black enrollment but also black retention rates increased tremendously during the decade.

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workers’ dissatisfaction stemmed not just from their wages, but the University’s unwillingness to provide decent accommodations for workers during their lunch breaks. “Lounges are woefully inadequate when they exist at all,” the *Cavalier Daily* observed. Usually “tucked away in the corner of a building” and “out of view,” the lounges normally consisted of “a table and a few chairs, not necessarily enough to sit all the people together.” Another issue for the workers was the University’s requirement that they substantiate their request for sick pay benefits. “You have to pay a doctor,” one worker quipped, “to receive pay.” 22 African Americans constituted a significant percentage of the workers enduring these indignities, but their concerns had receded to the background of the University’s racial politics. Unlike the 1960s and early 1970s when black workers’ issues were a central part of the political agenda of student activists, “community outreach” initiatives like toy and clothing drives for “underprivileged kids” and tutoring in predominantly black neighborhoods were now viewed by many “socially conscious” students as the best ways to engage the larger Charlottesville community. Student activism now centered on community service rather than workplace justice. Thus, many African American workers entered the 1980s grappling with many of the same issues as the ones confronting black laborers in previous years but operating in a different political environment, an environment in which labor seemed to have dropped out of the University community’s civil rights agenda.

Section II

Save for a sharp decline in the number of blacks employed in the paraprofessional and technical category, the percentage of African Americans in most occupational categories held steady or increased during the 1980s. The number of African Americans in the skilled crafts increased from 20 in 1980 to 128 in 1989. This period also witnessed a 41% increase in the

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number of African Americans classified as clerical/secretarial staff. Consistent with longstanding trends, African Americans remained overrepresented in the maintenance and service sector. Though black service and maintenance workers had a very visible presence on grounds, they rarely received mention in public conversations about race relations at the University. One important exception, however, was the 1987 *Audacious Faith* report, a sprawling document that surveyed the state of racial affairs on grounds and offered recommendations to the President, Robert O’Neil.

The *Audacious Faith* report had roots in a self-study the University conducted as part of its decennial reaccreditation for the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. The Steering Committee for the Self-Study had a variety of tasks, one of which involved evaluating the recruitment and retention of African American students and faculty. The committee’s extensive investigation led them to suggest the formation of a task force to study the present state of race relations on grounds and to “define an appropriate policy aimed at achieving full and genuine integration at the University.” 23 In response to the above recommendation, the University’s president impaneled a bi-racial committee of 16 faculty members, students, and administrators to conduct such a report. O’Neil’s charge to the committee made no mention of workers, but to its credit, the Task Force devoted its attention to the status of African American employees. Noting the disproportional representation of blacks across the various job classifications, the report condemned the overconcentration of African Americans in service and maintenance positions. It also directed attention to the precarious status of hourly employees:

Hourly employees represent the lower echelon of what is a de facto two-tier labor system operated by the University. Hourly wage positions carry with them no job security or grievance

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The Task Force’s focus on grievance rights undoubtedly bore the imprint of recent complaints from service employees about their lack of input in matters relating to their working conditions and hours. Though fear of losing their jobs silenced many low-wage black workers, there were a few brave souls who occasionally articulated their frustration with certain managerial decisions. For example, in the spring semester of 1985, a group of University custodians received a memo that their shifts would change from noon to 9 p.m. to 2 p.m. to 11 p.m. This allegedly occurred without any input from workers, many of whom lived more than an hour from the University. On April 24, 1985, University custodians met to express their opposition to the schedule change. Their grievances centered on family issues and safety concerns. One worker who preferred to be unidentified complained to the Captain Daily: “I never get to see my family now.” Another chimed in: “It’s taking my life away from me.”

Unorganized, workers lacked a vehicle through which to collectively articulate their discontent and challenge the power of their employer. The need for an employees union was evident, but it was not until the 1990s that the call for unionization gathered significant momentum. Thanks in part to the contributions of a small group of courageous workers as well as a superbly organized cadre of progressive faculty, labor returned to the forefront of civil rights conversations at UVA. These labor oriented conversations, particularly as they related to the status of African American workers, intensified during the mid-1990s. This was largely due to two local developments: (1) the Office of Equal Opportunity Program’s 1996 document, *An Examination of the University’s

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Minority Classified Staff: The Muddy Floor Report and (2) the founding of the Labor Action Group (LAG) in 1996. 25

Section III

Early in the summer of 1996, the Office of Equal Opportunity Programs (EOP) published the Muddy Floor Report. Using data filed between 1992 and 1995, the Muddy Floor Report provided a deeply troubling portrait of the status and treatment of African American workers at the University. The impetus for the report, according to the EOP, had been the upsurge in “complaints of employment discrimination and other workplace disparities with regard to race.” The vast majority of the complaints were from members of the classified staff. Thus, the EOP decided to “undertake an analysis of the classified work force to confirm or dispel the allegations being raised.” 26

The report discovered “glaring disparities” in employment opportunities, performance evaluations, and disciplinary sanctions between white and black employees. To the surprise of no one familiar with the labor situation at UVA, African Americans were overrepresented in unskilled positions and virtually non-existent in high salaried, managerial positions. While constituting only 17% of the entire classified workforce, they comprised 54% of the Service/Maintenance workers. Perhaps even more disturbing were the sharp racial disparities in job performance evaluations and disciplinary actions. The EOP’s analysis of job performance evaluations for the years 1993-1995 reveals that whites were much more likely to receive “exceptional” ratings than their African American counterparts. In 1994, a year the annual

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25 It bears mentioning that President Bill Clinton’s welfare reform bill also played a role in the upsurge in labor activism on grounds, but for the sake of space, the pages that follow will focus on local issues.

26 George King, President of the Charlottesville NAACP expressed dismay about the increasing number of complaints from African American classified employees of the University about their growing sense of frustration over the inequitable treatment that they experience in the workplace.

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budget allowed for merit raises based on an employee’s job performance rating, African Americans received an exceptional rating only 8.8% of the time while whites received an exceptional mark 23.5% of the time. To further compound matters, African Americans were much more likely to experience disciplinary action. Though blacks constituted 17% of the total classified workforce, they received 48% of the written notices. They also suffered from a disproportionate rate of termination.

The troubling findings in the *Muddy Floor* report, coupled with the Virginia Assembly’s promotion and adoption of the lagging pay system, confirmed in the minds of many the need for a staff union at UVA. Toward this goal, a coalition of workers, faculty, and community members laid the foundation for the Labor Action Group (LAG), which pushed for the unionization of University employees and the implementation of a living wage. The history of this group has been ably discussed in Eric Lott’s *The Disappearing Liberal Intellectual* and Nelson Lichtenstein’s *State of the Union*; however, a few basic facts bear repeating here. LAG, according to Lott, emerged in the fall semester of 1996 in response to the University’s adoption of a lagging system as a way to balance the budget. Under the lagging system, employees would defer two weeks of pay until the end of his or her career. Infuriated by what Lott and others viewed as the University’s attempt to “rationalize its business on the backs of low-wage employees,” a vocal group of faculty and staff sprang into action and committed themselves to building a labor movement on grounds. Cognizant of the many misconceptions surrounding the legal rights of public employees in a “Right to Work State,” LAG sought first and foremost to inform workers and the larger public of state employees right to organize. As Nelson Lichtenstein explained, “Because Virginia is a right-to-work state many people have the impression that unions are against the law.” To be sure, state law outlawed public employees

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from striking and collective bargaining, but the provisions of the National Labor Relations Act still granted workers the right to organize and join a union. In its own distinctive fashion, LAG also sought to democratize the work place. “We want to open up the idea that people who work at the University,” Lichtenstein argued, should have “their voices heard…I can tell you from my own private conversations that there’s enormous fear among the clerical staff that if they speak up they’ll find themselves out of a job.”

To build momentum for their emerging movement, LAG hosted a well-attended teach-in and symposium on February 27-28, 1997. The event featured such noted figures as Julian Bond, Ralph Nader, Richard Trumka, and Barbara Ehrenreich, as well as UVA faculty and staff. On the opening night, English professor Susan Fraiman announced the dawning of a new day for the University. “You are witnessing the birth of a new alliance and a new social movement.” In his opening remarks, Lichtenstein echoed Fraiman’s sentiments: “Tonight we want to strip away apathy, resignation and fatalism; and in their place imagine an new world of work, dignity, and security.”

Coupled with their push for a union, LAG also fought for the implementation of a living wage at the University (for classified workers and contract workers) and the larger Charlottesville community. Their living wage campaign officially launched on April 15, 1998, the day LAG leaders held a press conference demanding that the University increase its starting pay from $6.37 per hour to $8 per hour. Over the next several months, wage supporters relied on a variety of tactics to drive home the public benefits of providing workers a livable wage. A year and a half after launching its campaign, LAG celebrated a minor victory when the University’s

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28 Labor Action Group Files, Special Collections Library, University of Virginia.

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Board of Visitors voted to increase the starting wage for classified employees to $8.19. Even though BOV members and University officials insisted their actions had nothing to do with the demands of LAG, Living Wage proponents begged to differ. At the same time, since the salary raise did not cover contract workers, living wage advocates understood their battle was far from over. Though they faced an uphill battle, campus activists drew inspiration from their small victories, as well as larger developments taking place across the country.

Section IV

During the 1990s and early 2000s, nearly one hundred and fifty municipalities, including the city of Charlottesville, passed ordinances guaranteeing public employees wages above the local poverty threshold for a family of four. Moreover, a series of court rulings, particularly New Mexicans for Free Enterprise et. al. vs. the City of Santa Fe, Woodfin v. Emeryville, and Coca-Cola Bottling Company of Sante Fe, Inc. vs. The City of Santa Fe, confirmed municipalities’ broad power to adopt living wage laws as a way of protecting the public health and safety of its constituents. In tandem with their work at the municipal level, progressive politicians, union leaders, and activist lawyers have also mobilized public support for a constitutional amendment that will guarantee every American the right to a job and a livable wage. One of the most outspoken proponents of a constitutional amendment guaranteeing a living wage, legal scholar William Quigley has discussed at length the ways in which the implementation of a living wage scale in the public and private sector would improve the quality of life for all Americans. In Ending Poverty, Quigley notes: “By amending our Constitution to include the right to a job at a living wage, we are making a solemn promise to one another—a promise that those among us who want to work will always have the opportunity to do so and that those who work full time will earn enough to be self-supporting. As a nation, polls

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consistently show that we already support these principles. Incorporating them into our Constitution will keep them high on our list of national priorities.” 29

In the view of living wage advocates, these conversations play an important role in reinvigorating public discourse around issues of economic justice and the government’s responsibility to its citizens. “Aside from their direct effects,” political scientist Adolph Reed notes, living wage campaigns “are important in that they inject two important propositions into public discussion: (1) that a job is only worthwhile if it pays enough to live on, and (2) that government, which is responsible for the general public welfare, should not be implicated in employment at sub-poverty level wages.” 30

Claims by Reed and others that living wage campaigns have the potential to challenge hegemonic discourses on labor, race, and public policy definitely held true at the University of Virginia between November of 2005 and June of 2006. Seemingly everywhere, the plight of the working poor emerged as a popular topic of conversation among undergraduates. Needless to say, the human suffering endured by residents of the Gulf Coast in 2005 as a result of the deadly combination of Hurricane Katrina and neoliberal, governmental policies played a central role in the rising attention given to public policy matters related to labor. Not lost upon many students and faculty at UVA, however, was the hypocrisy of criticizing relief efforts in New Orleans while turning a blind eye to the economic deprivation engulfing thousands of women, men and children in Charlottesville. On the pages of the Cavalier Daily, second year student Kevin Simowitz fumed that “the failure of the University to pay its workers a living wage is a travesty that requires immediate attention and correction.” “A forty hour work week is meant to be the

30 Adolph Reed, Class Notes: Posing As Politics and Other Thoughts on the American Scene (New York: The New Press, 2000), 128-129.

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standard for full-time employment in the United States. At the University of Virginia, however, a 40-hour work week is the standard for living in poverty.”

Contemporary activists waging war against the University’s wage scale drew inspiration from previous economic justice initiatives at UVA, as well as concurrent student protests at Georgetown, the University of Notre Dame, Swarthmore, the University of Georgia, the University of Miami, and Arizona State.

UVA’s Living Wage supporters pushed hard for a change in the University’s labor policy. On February 21, 2006, the Living Wage Campaign released “Keeping Our Promise: Toward A Living Wage at the University,” a detailed report that encouraged the administration to adopt a living wage (10.72 per hour) for classified staff and contract employees. The report also outlined how the adoption of a living wage would benefit both workers and the city of Charlottesville. Cognizant of the University’s growing concern about its public image, living wage advocates strategically framed the matter of workers’ wages as a diversity issue.

That African Americans and women constituted a significant percentage of the University’s low-income employees, they argued, spoke volumes about the enduring legacy of structural racism and gender inequality. “The University’s stated commitment to diversity,” the report noted, “must confront the fact that people of color, particularly women, form a disproportionate number of those receiving less than a living wage.”

The report had the support of public officials (Senator Creigh Deeds and Mayor David Brown of Charlottesville), faculty members, state and national political groups (ACORN, the Virginia Organizing Project, and the Virginia AFL-CIO), and various student organizations (the Black Leadership Institute, the Black Student Alliance,

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31 *Cavalier Daily*, November 11, 2005.


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University Democrats). Furthermore, its release set in motion a series of events that would shine the national spotlight on the University of Virginia.

On February 22, 2006, two hundred students, faculty, and community activists assembled at the Rotunda in support of a living wage for workers. Chants of “10.72” pierced the air as gatherers questioned the University’s commitment to social justice and racial equity. In many ways, the living wage issue forced certain members of the UVA community to confront the exclusionary tendencies in their own “diversity and equity” discourses. None of the leading racial advocacy groups on campus had extended their diversity and equity concerns to low wage employees. Instead, their focus had centered primarily on (1) providing a safe and welcoming environment for African American students and (2) addressing issues of minority faculty retention. A major question raised during the living wage campaign, however, was whether organizational entities like the Office of African American Affairs, the Carter G. Woodson Institute for African American and African Studies\(^\text{34}\), and the Office for Diversity and Equity had a moral obligation to rally its resources around the current struggle to improve the material conditions of black workers. If African American administrative offices on campus were only concerned with protecting the rights of students and faculty members, then what does that say about the ways in which the vast majority of African Americans imagine “community?”

These questions weighed heavily on my mind as the living wage movement gathered steam. On March 3, University administrators informed the public that they had queried the Attorney General as to whether the University had the legal authority to set the minimum wage requirement for private contractors and vendors. One week later, the University raised the minimum wage for classified staff from $8.88 to $9.37. This hardly appeased living wagers,

\(^{34}\) Over the years, the faculty within the Woodson Institute have been extremely supportive of the living wage. Claudrena N. Harold
who responded with more dramatic action. On the morning of April 12, seventeen students staged a sit-in at Madison Hall, which housed the offices of President John Casteen and his staff. Word of the students’ actions quickly spread across grounds as dozens of students and faculty members dashed for Madison Hall. Subsequent events added fuel to an already smoldering flame. A moving speech by Julian Bond on the steps of the Rotunda situated current struggles for a living wage within the larger context of oppressed communities’ quest for human rights.

For the next three days, the Living Wage campaign captured the attention of students, administrators, faculty members, community leaders, and the media. Unfortunately however, negotiations between Casteen and the students stalled as he reiterated the University’s inability to force a living wage on contractors. Fed up with the impasse, school administrators enjoined the students to either end their sit-in or face arrest for trespassing. Shortly thereafter, the sit-in came to an end. On Saturday evening, around 7 p.m., local police arrested the students occupying Madison Hall and hauled them off to the Charlottesville Regional Jail.

President Casteen immediately went on the offensive by countering suggestions that the administration disregarded the needs of its low-wage workers: “In the end, the issue matters to all of us…because it is a matter of Virginia law and public policy.” Condemning the political tactics of the students, Casteen encouraged the protesters to pursue legislative and judicial action in their fight for a living wage. “Laws change in two fundamental ways: legislative action and judicial action. That is, either the living wage advocates can persuade the General Assembly to
change laws they dislike, or they can find constitutional grounds for litigation, and then sue, thus letting the courts determine what is lawful and what is not.”

The “defeat” of the sit-in represented the end of one phase of the living wage campaign at UVA, but in the years to come there would be other iterations. Late in the spring of 2010, conversations about reviving the campaign intensified among undergraduate and graduate students. Under the leadership of Greg Casar and Erin Franey, the campus group Workers and Students United strategized over ways to galvanize greater support for a living wage. Two years later, the University received national attention when Joseph Williams, a member of the varsity football team, participated in a hunger strike designed to secure a living wage for workers.

Combined with contesting the economic policies of the University, these campaigns have brought to the forefront important questions for scholars such as myself in the field of Black Studies. How do we facilitate, individually and collectively, a more radical political vision and praxis within and beyond the University? To what extent does our pedagogical agenda and service work advance the labor concerns and rights of working-class blacks? How do we organize our resources to address economically marginalized communities and groups within our midst? Such concerns might appear parochial to those convinced that real political battles over social policy, racial justice, and economic inequality exist in more formal settings (courts, Congress, labor unions); yet, it is my belief that academics must think critically about the institutional spaces we inhabit in our everyday lives, the ways in which we shape our students’ understanding of the world, and the unique opportunities we have to effect democratic change. To dodge this responsibility is to dishonor the legacy of our elders and ancestors whose political

35 John Casteen, “A Letter from President Casteen Concerning Competitive Compensation at the University,” April 20, 2006

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agenda extended beyond tenured track positions, endowed chairs, and nods of approval from University administrators. Especially given the devastating impact of the current economic crisis on African American communities, it is imperative for us to speak honestly about these issues.